

Unequal Earths: Climate Justice and the Politics of Vulnerability in Select Indian Climate Fiction

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Abstract

Climate change is increasingly recognised not merely as an environmental crisis but as a profoundly unequal social phenomenon. The discourse of climate justice foregrounds how marginalised communities disproportionately bear the burdens of ecological degradation despite contributing least to its causes. This paper examines the representation of climate justice and vulnerable communities in select Indian literary texts, including *The Hungry Tide* (2014), *Gun Island* (2019), *Latitudes of Longing* (2019), *The Butterfly Effect* (2019), and *A Guardian and a Thief*. Drawing on postcolonial ecocriticism, eco-narratology, and intersectionality, the study explores how Indian fiction narrates environmental injustice through caste, class, gender, and indigeneity. The paper argues that these texts not only depict ecological crises but also critique structural inequalities and advocate for a more inclusive and ethical environmental imagination.

Keywords

Climate justice, Indian climate fiction, vulnerability, postcolonial ecocriticism, eco-narratology, subaltern ecology

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Climate change has emerged as one of the most urgent crises of the twenty-first century. Yet, its impacts are profoundly uneven, revealing deep-rooted inequalities across regions, communities, and social structures. Increasingly, scholars argue that climate change must be understood not merely as an environmental or scientific problem but as a question of justice, one that foregrounds issues of power, responsibility, and vulnerability. The framework of climate justice challenges universalising narratives by emphasising that those who contribute least to environmental degradation, particularly marginalised communities in the Global South, bear the greatest burden of its consequences (Schlosberg 2007). In the Indian context, this disparity is further intensified by entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and gender, as well as by the enduring legacies of colonial resource extraction. Consequently, climate change operates as an “inequality multiplier,” exacerbating existing vulnerabilities while simultaneously producing new forms of ecological and social precarity.

Indian climate fiction (cli-fi) offers a significant literary space to examine these complexities, as it foregrounds the lived experiences of vulnerable communities and situates environmental crises within socio-political contexts. Unlike many

Western climate narratives that often focus on technological solutions or distant apocalyptic futures, Indian texts emphasise immediacy, locality, and lived reality. These narratives depict fisherfolk navigating rising sea levels, indigenous communities confronting displacement, migrants forced into precarious mobility, and urban poor populations exposed to toxic environments. Through such representations, Indian climate fiction reveals that environmental crises are inseparable from structures of inequality and power. It is within this context that this study examines select Indian texts, arguing that they not only document ecological transformations but also critique systemic injustice and reimagine more equitable ecological futures.

The present analysis is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates climate justice theory, postcolonial ecocriticism, eco-narratology, and intersectionality. Climate justice provides the central conceptual lens, emphasising distributive, procedural, and recognition-based dimensions of environmental inequality (Schlosberg 2007). Distributive justice highlights how environmental harms are unevenly allocated, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities, while procedural justice interrogates the exclusion of these communities from decision-making processes. Recognition justice, in turn, calls for the acknowledgement of diverse cultural identities and knowledge systems, particularly those of indigenous and subaltern groups. These dimensions are crucial for understanding how Indian climate fiction narratives foreground environmental injustice and marginalised voices.

Postcolonial ecocriticism further deepens this analysis by situating contemporary environmental crises within the historical context of colonialism and its enduring legacies. Colonial exploitation fundamentally reshaped ecological and economic systems, establishing patterns of extraction and inequality that persist in the present.

As Huggan and Tiffin (2010) argue, postcolonial environments continue to bear the imprint of these histories, resulting in uneven development and ecological degradation. Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence" is particularly relevant here, as it captures the gradual and often invisible environmental harm inflicted on marginalised communities over time. In the context of Indian fiction, slow violence manifests through rising sea levels, deforestation, pollution, and displacement, processes that may lack the immediacy of spectacular disasters but are nonetheless deeply destructive. By employing postcolonial ecocriticism, this study reveals how climate change is both a legacy of historical injustice and a continuation of contemporary global inequalities.

Eco-narratology provides an additional layer of analysis by examining how narrative structures and techniques shape the representation of environmental crises. Rather than focusing solely on thematic content, eco-narratology explores how storytelling mediates human relationships with the natural world. Heise (2008) emphasises that narratives play a crucial role in constructing a "sense of planet," connecting local ecological experiences to global environmental processes. In Indian climate fiction, narrative strategies such as fragmentation, multiple perspectives, and the inclusion of non-human agency reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of ecological systems. These techniques challenge anthropocentric modes of representation and foreground the entanglement of human and non-human worlds, thereby offering alternative ways of conceptualising environmental relationships.

Intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989), is also central to this framework, as it highlights how different axes of identity, like caste, class, gender, and indigeneity, intersect to shape experiences of climate vulnerability. In the Indian context, environmental vulnerability is deeply

stratified, with marginalised communities facing compounded forms of oppression. Women in rural and coastal regions, for instance, often experience heightened vulnerability due to gendered divisions of labour and limited access to resources, while indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by displacement and environmental policies that disregard their rights. By incorporating intersectionality, this study underscores the need to consider multiple dimensions of inequality in analysing climate justice.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* offers a compelling exploration of ecological vulnerability in the Sundarbans, a region characterised by its fragile ecosystem and susceptibility to climate-induced disasters. The novel foregrounds the lives of marginalised communities whose existence is shaped by both environmental forces and state interventions. The historical reference to the Morichjhapi massacre underscores the tension between conservation policies and human rights, illustrating how environmental protection can become a form of exclusionary governance. Guha (2000) identifies this conflict as a tension between preservationist and livelihood-based environmentalism, a dynamic that is vividly depicted in the novel. The character of Fokir embodies subaltern ecological knowledge, demonstrating an intimate understanding of the tidal ecosystem that contrasts with the scientific detachment of formal conservation efforts. His marginalisation reflects recognition injustice, as indigenous knowledge systems are often dismissed in favour of technocratic approaches.

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh extends the discourse of climate justice to a transnational scale, linking environmental degradation in the Sundarbans with migration crises in Europe. The novel illustrates how climate change acts as a catalyst for displacement, forcing communities into precarious mobility. Migrants are subjected to exploitative labour

conditions and exclusionary policies, reflecting broader patterns of global inequality. This aligns with Nixon's (2011) notion of slow violence, as the cumulative effects of environmental degradation compel migration over time. By intertwining myth and contemporary reality, the novel challenges linear conceptions of time and highlights the historical continuity of ecological disruption.

Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* explores the interconnectedness of diverse ecosystems, emphasising the vulnerability of peripheral regions such as the Andaman Islands. Indigenous communities are depicted as possessing a deep, symbiotic relationship with their environment, yet their ways of life are threatened by external interventions that prioritise economic growth over ecological sustainability. This reflects recognition injustice, as indigenous epistemologies are marginalised within dominant environmental discourse. The novel's fragmented narrative structure mirrors the fragmentation of ecosystems, reinforcing the interconnectedness of human and non-human worlds.

Rajorshi Chakraborti's *The Butterfly Effect* shifts the focus to urban environments, where climate injustice manifests through pollution, overcrowding, and socio-economic inequality. The novel highlights how environmental degradation disproportionately affects the urban poor, particularly women and children, thereby underscoring the intersection of gender and environmental vulnerability. This aligns with intersectional analysis, which emphasises the interconnected nature of oppression (Crenshaw 1989). Environmental issues in urban contexts are often rendered invisible within policy frameworks, reflecting broader patterns of neglect and marginalisation.

Anita Roy's *A Guardian and a Thief* presents a dystopian vision of a climate-affected Kolkata, where access to resources determines survival. The

concept of “climate visas” introduces a stark division between those who can escape environmental crises and those who cannot, exemplifying what Alston (2019) describes as “climate apartheid.” This narrative raises critical ethical questions about responsibility and justice, challenging readers to consider the implications of unequal adaptation in a warming world.

Across these texts, climate change is consistently represented as a socio-political phenomenon shaped by inequality. Indian climate fiction challenges dominant narratives by foregrounding marginalised voices and exposing the structural causes of environmental degradation. These narratives function as sites of resistance, offering alternative ways of understanding and responding to ecological crises. The emphasis on subaltern ecologies highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge systems, while the critique of neoliberal development models underscores the need for more equitable approaches to environmental governance.

In conclusion, Indian climate fiction plays an important role in articulating the complexities of climate justice and vulnerability. By bringing forward the experiences of marginalised communities, these texts challenge dominant narratives and advocate for more inclusive and equitable approaches to environmental issues. Through the integration of climate justice theory, postcolonial ecocriticism, eco-narratology, and intersectionality, this study demonstrates that literature is not only a reflection of ecological realities but also a powerful tool for imagining alternative futures grounded in justice and sustainability

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